



Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

Planning Update #3/Summer 2006



A tagged barn owl



Quail eggs

Greetings from the Refuge Manager

We are pleased to have made significant progress in preparing a draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for Stone Lakes NWR. The results of this multi-year CCP process will guide overall refuge management over the next 15 years.

Copies of the draft CCP should be available during September 2006. We plan to hold two public meetings at that time to solicit public comments. Your observations are extremely valuable to us so we urge you to actively participate in this process.

In the past few years, we have increased the land managed by the refuge by 50 percent. We have also implemented a number of programs that pre-date the CCP process that will significantly expand opportunities for visitor use. These include a waterfowl hunting program and construction of wetland habitats near the refuge headquarters on Hood-Franklin Road. This year, we plan to begin construction on a parking area, universally accessible trails, and interpre-

tive displays and kiosks to enable the public to see and learn about Refuge during daylight hours, seven days a week.

We have continued to work on habitat management activities to benefit native fish and wildlife populations and nearby residents. These include improving the cattle grazing program, controlling the spread of invasive upland and aquatic weeds, and partnering with several local agencies to perform prescribed fire operations on the refuge.

We appreciate your interest in Stone Lakes NWR. Please feel free to attend one of our public meetings in October to comment on the final CCP. See page eight for the schedule and how to contact us.

Tom Harvey
Tom Harvey
Refuge Manager

Table of Contents

Greetings from the Refuge Manager	1
Since the Last Planning Update	1
Big Changes at Headquarters Property	2
First Hunting Program Takes Off	2
Revised Goals for Stone Lakes	3
Draft Management Alternatives	3
Other Refuge News	5
What is a CCP?	7
Become a Volunteer	8
Help Us Plan the Future	8

Since the Last Planning Update

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge has continued to grow and change since our last Planning Update in the Summer 2002.

During this time we have focused heavily on our Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). The Refuge conducted four public meetings and received numerous comments from people interested in helping us develop this important planning document. We also met separately with many stakeholders and have considered numerous suggestions for habitat management and visitor use. After this lengthy public process, the draft CCP is now final and will be released very soon. Upon its release, you will have a last opportunity to make comments about the proposed plan and your visions for the Refuge.

We have also made progress in a number of other areas. We completed a hunting plan and opened a portion of the Refuge to waterfowl hunting for the first time (see article "First Hunting Program on Refuge"). We completed an environmental assessment for the Headquarters Unit and began habitat restoration efforts and planning of visitor use facilities (See article "Big Changes at Headquarters Property").

The Refuge has also expanded during this time with the addition of two new properties and one conservation easement, and now totals about 6000 acres. Wildlife populations have expanded accordingly with over 250 greater sandhill cranes now using the Refuge.

Big Changes at Headquarters Property

Old timers who pass the Refuge headquarters will remember that the office was once a home bordered by vineyards. Following acquisition, the Refuge removed the vines and is now restoring wetlands, grasslands and riparian habitats and planning for visitor services. The hope has always been to restore a mosaic of wildlife habitats and invite the public to enjoy educational and wildlife viewing activities.

Today, a series of swales, islands, berms, and dikes are evidence that this vision is being realized. During 2005, the Service finished most of the wetland construction and began native grass and riparian restoration. These restoration efforts will continue for several years with the help of grants and many Refuge volunteers. When the project is concluded about 251 acres (76 percent) of the 331-acre Headquarters site will be a mix of seasonal and permanent wetlands (106 acres), wet meadow and upland native grasslands (100 acres), and a variety of riparian habitats (about 45 acres). The remaining acreage will continue to be farmed to benefit wildlife.

The Headquarters Project location one mile west of Interstate-5 and adjacent to



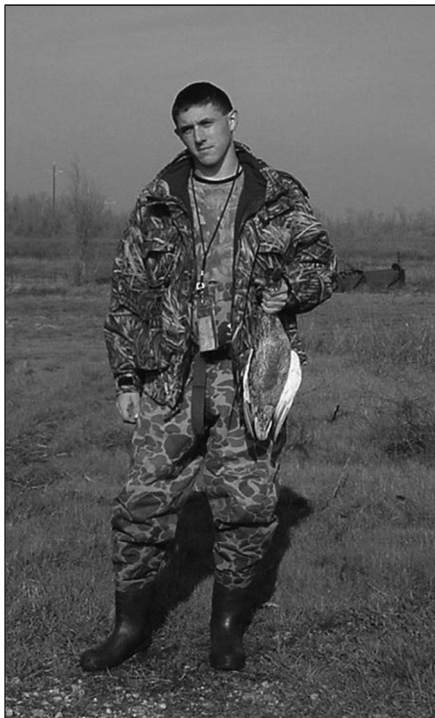
Volunteers help plant trees next to new Refuge Headquarters wetland. USFWS photos

Stone Lakes NWR office makes it an ideal setting for students and other visitors to enjoy nature. The Refuge hopes to offer opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, interpretation, and nature study showcasing a full range of Central Valley habitats.

The Headquarters Project will eventually include more than two miles of walking

trails and boardwalks accessible to those with disabilities, a viewing platform, photography blind, and interpretive kiosks, and an outdoor educational shelter. When completed, the Service anticipates 11,000 visitors will use the site each year.

First Hunting Program Takes Off



A successful hunter at the Sun River Unit. USFWS photo

When the notice to submit applications was circulated for the first public waterfowl hunting opportunity at Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, the enthusiastic response was no surprise.

For decades, people in private duck clubs have enjoyed waterfowl hunting at South Stone Lakes. Beginning on October 22, 2005, the public finally had a chance to experience the same "intimate" hunting experience. The Refuge's limited land base makes it impossible to compete with hunt programs at larger sister refuges, such as Sacramento and Delevan. But our first groups of hunters report that they enjoyed the hunting experience in a small, controlled setting that feels much like a private duck club.

Each Wednesday and Saturday during hunting season, six groups were drawn to hunt from four spaced-blinds and two water-blinds located on South Stone Lake in the Sun River Unit. Hunters drawn for a spaced-blind use strategically located pits or platforms. Those drawn for a boat

hunt are given a flat John boat to paddle to a blind on stilts, complete with a platform and camouflage screening. A seventh mobile blind is reserved for people with mobility impairments. They are provided a wheelchair accessible pontoon boat which can be pulled by a hunting partner to an area of choice.

One of the big requests made during CCP scoping was to provide safe opportunities for youths to learn to hunt. The Refuge has responded by reserving one space blind and one boat blind each Saturday for one or two youngsters with an adult. Youth hunters are even given first choice in selecting their blinds.

The first response to this Service-run hunting program has been very positive. Sacramento area residents are very aware of the limited public hunting opportunities within the county. Seasoned hunters and novices are equally enthused about the chance to experience a traditional hunting area that, in some cases, may be just a few miles from home.

Revised Goals for Stone Lakes

The planning team created the following revised goals based on a) interim refuge goals defined in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Land Protection Plan; b) your input during the scoping process for this draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan/Environmental Assessment (CCP/EA); c) internal Fish and Wildlife Service review; and d) recommendations from the Biological Review (2002).



Visitors will enjoy increased public access on the Refuge. USFWS photo

Goal 1. Conserve, enhance, restore, and manage Central Valley wetland, riparian, grassland, and other native habitats to benefit their associated native fish, wildlife, plants, and special status species.

Goal 2. Conserve, enhance, and restore high quality migrating, wintering, and breeding habitat for migratory birds within the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta of the Central Valley.

Goal 3. Provide visitors with wildlife-dependent recreation, interpretation, and education opportunities which foster an understanding of the Refuge's unique wildlife and plant communities in an urban setting.

Goal 4. In cooperation with tribal representatives, identify and protect cultural resources on the Refuge and educate the public regarding American Indians and the history of the region.

*“Provide visitors
with wildlife-
dependent
recreation,
interpretation,
and education
opportunities...”*

Draft Management Alternatives

What follows are brief, general summaries of each alternative. Please consult the full CCP to learn more about these topics.

Alternative A

Under Alternative A, the No Action Alternative, the Service would continue to manage Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in the same manner as it has in the recent past.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

- Manage wetlands to provide habitat for migrating, wintering, and breeding birds.
- Maintain wildlife friendly farming practices.
- Maintain short grass habitat through grazing on the North Stone Lake Unit.
- Maintain existing riparian areas.
- Control invasive weeds, such as water hyacinth and yellow starthistle.
- Cooperate with SYMVCD to minimize mosquito production.

VISITOR SERVICES

- Maintain open touring days on the Beach Lake Unit for wildlife interpretation, observation and photography two days per month .
- Annually host Walk on the Wildside.
- Maintain waterfowl hunting program on South Stone Lake.
- Offer environmental education tours for school and other groups one day per week.



The Refuge cooperates with many partners to annually remove invasive water hyacinth from refuge ponds and waterways. USFWS photo

Alternative B

Under Alternative B, management for migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, and all wildlife-dependent public uses on the Refuge would be improved and expanded as follows:

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

- Restore riparian, wetland, and grassland habitats throughout the Refuge.
- Monitor and expand control of invasive species.
- Expand surveys of wildlife and vegetation.
- Develop a water-quality monitoring program.
- Flood wetland units in early fall to benefit cranes and shorebirds.
- Draw down one permanent wetland unit in fall for migrating shorebirds.
- Improve burrowing owl habitat.
- Develop grazing management plans for grasslands, vernal pools, and irrigated pastures.

VISITOR SERVICES

- Open the South Stone Lake, Headquarters, and a portion of the North Stone Lake Units to the public seven days a week with seasonal closures.
- Construct a "Junior Biologist" trail system, boardwalks, interpretive displays, and other visitor facilities at the Headquarters Unit.
- Offer car-top boat access on the Sun River and Beach Lake units.
- Build an observation platform and parking lot on the North Stone Lake Unit for sandhill crane viewing.
- Improve parking and access at Headquarters Unit.
- Offer vernal pool guided tours at the Wetland Preserve Unit
- Expand environmental education tours on the Beach Lake Unit to schools, and other groups.
- Restrict visitor use during sensitive nesting periods.

Alternative C

Under this alternative, the Service would continue to focus on providing wintering habitat for migratory birds and managing for endangered species, while placing a greater emphasis on historic conditions in management and habitat restoration activities. The chief differences between Alternatives B and C are as follows:

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

- Focus management of Refuge lands on the restoration of historic native plant communities rather than maintaining lands in agriculture or constructed wetlands.
- Accomplish riparian restoration by allowing natural expansion of riparian habitat.

- Flood up seasonal wetlands concurrent with the first rainfall to mimic natural conditions.

VISITOR SERVICES

Alternative C includes many of the visitor services included in Alternative B. However, visitor services would emphasize self-guided environmental interpretation, not programs facilitated by a staff member or volunteers. The following public uses would be added under Alternative C:

- Open Beach Lake Unit to the public seven days a week.
- Develop trails and parking on the Lodi Gun Club tract.
- Develop trails and improve parking on the Lewis and North Stone Lake units.



Top: The Refuge manages the wetlands to provide habitat for wintering, breeding, and migrating birds. Bottom: This urban refuge offers visitors with outstanding opportunities to see a rich variety of birds and other wildlife. USFWS photos

Other Refuge News

Prescribed Burns

To prevent wildfires along Interstate 5 between the Refuge and housing developments, the Refuge has joined forces with several federal and local fire agencies including the Elk Grove Community Service District (CSD) Fire Department, Wilton Fire Department, Sacramento Metro Fire Department, National Park Service, and U.S. Forest Service to conduct prescribed burns on the 1,400-acre Wetland Preserve Unit. About 100 acres were burned in 2005 within the 1,400-acre Wetland Preserve Unit in 2005 to prevent a repeat of 2003, when Elk Grove firefighters responded to 98 grass fires along a 25-mile stretch of Interstate 5.



Expanded Crane Use

Sandhill crane use has continued to increase on the Refuge following several years of controlled grazing and wetland management on the North and South Stone Lake Units, and Beach Lake Unit. Prior to grazing, the grasslands were too tall and dense to appeal to cranes, which forage in the short grass and roost at night in adjacent wetland units, safe from predators. Now the overgrown pastures have returned to productive grasslands, providing habitat not only for cranes, but also thousands of white-fronted geese, long billed curlews, meadowlarks and hawks.



Top and middle: A prescribed burn helps reduce the risk of wildfires to homes adjacent to the Refuge. Bottom: A controlled grazing program has improved Refuge grasslands for wintering sandhill cranes and other wildlife species. USFWS photo

Refuge Expanded by 2,000 Acres

Refuge-managed lands have nearly doubled with the addition of 2,000 acres of grasslands, wetlands, and riparian habitats. The 537-acre Sun River Unit was conveyed to the Service in fee title in 2005. At the northern end of the refuge, the Wetland Preserve Unit is also being managed to benefit wildlife through a conservation easement. In the future, the Refuge may offer some educational and interpretive programs at this site.

Threats to Stone Lakes

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge was among six of the most threatened national wildlife refuges in the United States according to a recently released report from the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA). *State of the System: Beyond the Boundaries* urges conservation of lands and waters located outside of national wildlife refuges. The report notes that these buffer zones have more agriculture, subdivision, and other human activity than the national average. It tells the story of 12 refuges — six threatened and six rescued — that graphically illustrate why we must take action now.

“The protection of buffer zones is absolutely critical to the National Wildlife Refuge System,” said Evan Hirsche, president of the National Wildlife Refuge Association, which issued the report. “Since many of the lands within buffer zones are privately held, we must work closely with landowners to ensure the long-term protection of these national treasures.”

*“The protection of
buffer zones
is absolutely critical
to the National
Wildlife Refuge System.”*

*Evan Hirsche
President, NWRA*

The NWRA is urging Congress and the Administration to implement five solutions: strengthening incentives for private landowners to practice conservation; conserving more land through acquisition and easements; allocating more funds at the state level; conducting more research to determine priorities; and establishing preventative systems for shipping disasters near refuges. These types of solutions offer guidance for developing creative and responsive partnership efforts.

Walk on the Wildside

This festival was held at the Beach Lake Preserve and once again celebrated International Migratory Bird Day. This year, 2,000 people participated in the popular event. They enjoyed a free, family-oriented day in Central Valley habitats with lively entertainment and up-close views of wildlife. The event included live wild animal presentations, guided and self-guided tours, exhibitors and hands-on activities, live music, great food, and many other activities.



Top: The Marsh Wren Centennial Wetland was created with community support and grants. Bottom: Volunteers “bookend” a school group doing nature study along the SP Cut. USFWS photos

When Congress passed the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, it incorporated an underlying philosophy that “wildlife comes first” on refuges.

The act provides the FWS with guidance for managing refuges to ensure the long-term conservation of fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Three important principles of the act are to maintain biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge and facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreation.

Every refuge is to have a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) completed by 2012. The CCP will detail Refuge goals, objectives, and management strategies. It is a flexible, “living” document that will be updated every 15 years.

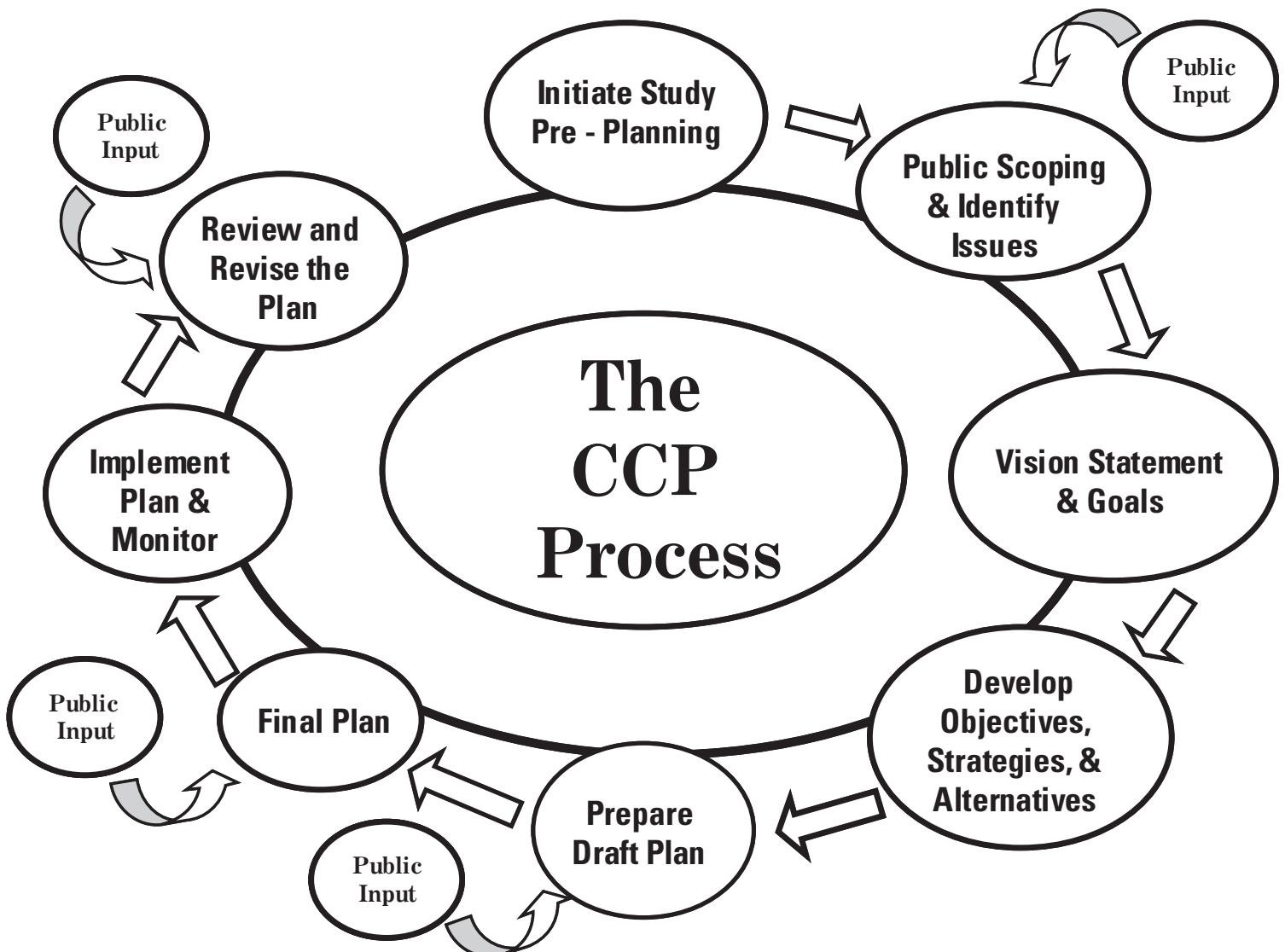
The CCP:

- Ensures that management of the refuge reflects the purposes of the refuge and the mission, policies, and goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System;
- Provides the public with an understanding of the reasons for management actions on the refuge;
- Provides a vision statement for the refuge;
- Ensures the compatibility of current and future uses of the refuge with its purposes;
- Provides long-term continuity in refuge management; and

- Provides budget justification for operation, maintenance, and facility development requests.

The CCP will provide broad management direction and guidance for the refuge, contingent upon future funding and resources. The accompanying environmental document, required by the National Environmental Policy Act, will describe the alternatives considered and their environmental effects. You will have an opportunity to review and comment on the draft CCP and environmental document.

During fall 2002, we held our first public scoping meetings and the draft plan is now nearly complete. The key planning steps pictured below provide a visual reference that will help you track our progress during the planning process.



Become a Volunteer

Stone Lakes enjoys dedicated support from a growing corps of volunteers. They range in age from 10 to over 80. Volunteers come from several nearby communities, the Stone Lakes NWR Association board of directors, service learning and community service students, local scouts, local agencies, and college professors.

Volunteers offer time, knowledge, and talent on a wide variety of projects, from assisting with Walk on the Wildside and leading school tours to providing labor for bird surveys, refuge cleanup, and restoration days.

The refuge is always looking for help. Please contact Amy Hopperstad at 916/775-4421 for more information.

*“Volunteers offer time,
knowledge, and talent
on a wide variety of
projects.”*

We Want to Hear From You

After publication of the Draft CCP, you will have a 30-day period to comment on the draft document. You may also attend two public meetings to give comments. See box to right for meeting dates and locations.

If you wish to respond in writing, please send comments to: David Bergendorf, Refuge Planner, 2800 Cottage Way, W-1832, Sacramento, CA 95825-1846. Comments may also be faxed to 916/414-6497 or submitted via email to david_bergendorf@fws.gov. If submitting comments by fax, please address to Attn: David Bergendorf, Re: Stone Lakes NWR CCP. If submitting email, please type “Stone Lakes NWR CCP” in the subject line.

You will be able to view and download the Draft CCP/EA at <http://www.fws.gov/stonelakes/publicreview.htm>. Printed documents will also be available for review at the following libraries:

Sacramento Central Library, 828 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814; *Arden-Dimick Library*, 891 Watt Avenue, Sacramento, CA 95864; *Belle Cooledge Library*, 5600 South Land Park Drive, Sacramento, CA 95822; *Elk Grove Library*, 8962 Elk Grove Blvd., Elk Grove, CA 95624; *Clarksburg Yolo County Library*, 52915 Netherlands Road, Clarksburg, CA 95612; *Colonial Heights*

Meeting Dates/Location

Dates: October 4 and 5, 2006

Time: 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.

Location: Elk Grove Community Services District, Administration Building, Boardroom
8820 Elk Grove Blvd.,
Elk Grove, CA 95624

Library, 4799 Stockton Blvd., Sacramento, CA 95820; *Courtland Library Neighborhood Library*, 170 Primasing Avenue, Courtland, CA 95615; and the *Galt Branch Library (Marian O. Lawrence Library)*, 1000 Caroline Avenue, Galt, CA 95632.

Please Feel Free to Contact Us!

We are available to provide additional information about the refuge history, goals, and accomplishments to date, and to answer any questions about the planning process. Feel free to call, write, e-mail, or come to see us.

If you did not receive this newsletter through the mail and would like to be on our mailing list, please contact us. You can also get information at our website <http://pacific.fws.gov/planning/>

If you would like to be removed from the list or are receiving multiple copies of these notices, please let us know.

Tom Harvey, Project Leader
Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
1624 Hood-Franklin Road
Elk Grove, CA 95758
916/775-4421 phone
916/775-4407 fax
Thomas_Harvey@fws.gov

Office Hours
Monday-Friday
7:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m.

David Bergendorf, Refuge Planner
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service CA/NV
Refuge Planning Office
2800 Cottage Way, W-1916
Sacramento, CA 95825
916/414-6503 phone
916/414-6512 fax
David_Bergendorf@fws.gov



From painting tattoos to leading tours, volunteers provide invaluable assistance at the Refuge's annual event, Walk on the Wildside. USFWS photo